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Editors' Introduction: Cultural Studies toward a Free Palestine

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ABSTRACT Responding to Palestinian organizers' calls to use our voice, continue to engage in conversations, and to speak out, this statement articulates what we see as the abolitionist and anti-colonial way forward—the only way we can commit to a free Palestine. Imagining and building alternatives is the future, the horizon of possibility, that *Lateral*, as part of the intellectual and activist project of cultural studies, is imperfectly but consistently striving toward. Here, we highlight work in this issue, including the Towards Third Worlding forum, articles, book reviews, and the second installment of the Positions podcast. We continue to welcome authors to join in this work of pushing the field of cultural studies further, towards its promise of critical inquiry matched by political engagement.

KEYWORDS Palestine, abolition, anti-colonialism, cultural studies, scholarship, settler colonialism

A little over a year ago, Noura Erakat reported on the work of the Palestinian Feminist Collective (PFC)[1] in an essay in the *Boston Review* entitled "Designing the Future in Palestine."[2] In it, she highlights work that gestures well beyond national liberation, toward revolutionary struggle from within societies, including Palestine. Erakat cites the indigenous seed archiving project of Vivien Sansour, along with the anti-colonial movement-building work of PFC founding member Loubna Qutami, who states: "We are disrupting the idea that we liberate ourselves politically first and then recreate our society from the ground up after." For Erakat, and in accordance with Palestinian feminists engaged in revolutionary struggle, "if

anti-colonial efforts seek to tear down oppressive structures, then decolonial ones aim to build alternatives." We see this as the abolitionist and anti-colonial way forward—the only way we can commit to a free Palestine. Imagining and building alternatives is the future, the horizon of possibility, that *Lateral*, as part of the intellectual and activist project of cultural studies, is imperfectly but consistently striving toward.

Palestinian organizers on the ground and Palestinian diasporic peoples have called for continued attention to Palestine to support their decolonial and anti-colonial struggles, essential both because of media blackouts and colonialist patterns of misrepresentation.[3] Such organizers have asked us to use our voices,[4] continue to engage in conversations,[5] and to speak out.[6] We amplify the authoritative sources who are still writing on and in this moment, even if they are doing so in so-called non-traditional formats like social media: Plestia Alaqad, Motaz Azaiza, Bisan Owda, and Wael Al Dahdouh, among others.[7] These journalists are keeping a genealogical thread alive in the face of the immediacy and urgency of violent erasure. They remind us that the unspeakable must be spoken, the unreadable must be written, that we must "take a bet. Not a bet on truth," or the possibility of saying it all, "but a bet on saying something."[8]

The Palestinian death toll currently stands at over 22,000 people killed, among them over 6,000 children; even more have been injured. Two million people have had to leave their homes and many of them have no home to return to because of the ongoing bombing by the Israeli military.[9] International courts will eventually rule if this unchecked killing and destruction meets the legal definition of genocide, but Indigenous feminists have long connected colonialism and genocide.[10] The crisis of our current crisis is that it simultaneously is exceptional and is not; it is both something we have never seen before and something that we have become inured to witnessing. Walter Benjamin reminds us, "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule."[11] And, as scholars of cultural studies, it is difficult not to

see the direct connections between Israel and the United States as settler colonial states. The Nakba of 1948 displaced more than 750,000 Palestinians and has its roots in the 1917 Balfour Declaration, wherein Britain officially recognized the Zionist settlements in Palestine; countless Native and Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island and Hawai'i were displaced and murdered as settlers from Britain, France, and elsewhere arrived.[12] Today, the bombs being dropped on civilians in Gaza are manufactured in the United States[13] and we cannot ignore the mutual economic benefits that run between the United States and Israel which allow for and facilitate such ongoing and wholesale destruction.[14]

There has been a sense of impossibility in writing at this time. Facing the enormity of genocide feels unthinkable with the paltry tools of scholarship, of writing, of speaking. How much agony, loss, outrage, and despair can be adequately conveyed through words? Another impossibility of writing in this moment is citationality. We believe in the politics of an ethical citational practice, of engaging in citation as a site of community, generosity, coalition, and solidarity. The genealogies created by citation are intellectual-political edifices, ways of shaping the future through pointed attention to lineages of thought and values. Yet, at least sixty-nine journalists have been killed in Gaza since the beginning of October.[15] Too many activists, artists, writers, and other cultural workers to count have been killed as well, like Palestinian scholar and poet Refaat Alareer, who was murdered on December 6 and whose loss is devastating and mourned by so many.[16] It is impossible to cite what goes unwritten.

At the end of October, an ad hoc scholarly coalition called Writers Against the War on Gaza (WAWOG) wrote: "Words alone cannot stop the onslaught of devastation of Palestinian homes and lives, backed shamelessly and without hesitation by the entire axis of Western power. At the same time, we must reckon with the role words and images play in the war on Gaza and the ferocious support they have engendered . . . we cannot write a free Palestine into existence, but together we must do all we possibly can to reject narratives that soothe Western complicity in

ethnic cleansing."[17] WAWOG cites the eugenicist framing by which Palestinians have been referred to as "human animals,"[18] the ways that the actions of the Israeli state have been framed as preserving the values of human rights and human life, as "self-defense," even as they destroy hospitals, churches, and refugee camps; and how, through all of this, the mainstream media has spun the genocide as a response to an "unprovoked attack" by Hamas and thus how the "conflict" "began" on October 7. We understand that much of the wild misinformation and irresponsible rhetoric surrounding Palestine and Israel is in large part caused by the dissemination of colonial and white supremacist ideologies; we understand that such dissemination is connected to colonial and white supremacist reading, writing, editing and publishing practices.

Another statement, this one by the "Writers in Solidarity with Palestine" makes clear: "Language is critical to how reality is shaped, to what is criticized, to what gets called a revolution. Islamophobic, genocidal, anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian rhetoric are all rooted in the languages we use. It is our responsibility to lay bare how language has been used to obscure and preserve the ongoing settler colonial project outside of Gaza."[19] And, as Toni Morrison reminds us, "Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge."[20] Or to put it yet another way, from Edward Said: "Too often literature and culture are presumed to be politically, even historically innocent; it has regularly seemed otherwise to me."[21] As editors of *Lateral*, we take seriously the political and intellectual practices of writing as something that can buttress violence, but, too, can counteract it in the name of solidarity and liberation—not just in the here and now, but in the ever-present labor, to return to Erakat, of building alternatives.

We at *Lateral* understand that a commitment to Palestinian liberation, to decolonization, to abolition, is concomitant with a commitment to and work in cultural studies. We understand cultural studies as a deeply political and intellectual discipline and practice, and these stances are indebted to the

genealogies of cultural studies as foregrounded by Stuart Hall. For Hall, the serious study of the experiences of people insists upon dwelling in the nuances of identity intersections; as a Jamaican-born Black British scholar, he experienced all too keenly the ways in which "culture" was separated from both intellectual practices and political ones and instead wielded, defanged, as a marker of British liberalism and progress. In contrast, a cultural studies *habit of mind*, for Hall and many others, is to understand culture as a site of urgent inquiry and liberatory practices both ongoing and ephemeral. Throughout Hall's career, from his collaborative work on *Policing the Crisis* to his sustained prehumous critiques of neoliberalism in *Soundings and Red Pepper*, Hall's intellectual, critical, and political writing alerts us to the task of challenging the predominant ideological configurations of reality.[22] Thus, "the first task that cultural studies had to do turns out to be the last task as well: to do some work in conceptualizing culture more adequately than had been done in the traditions which were available."[23] The emergence of cultural studies as a framework of thought insisted upon "culture" as central to situating lived experiences and embodied knowledges as both constituted by and in resistance to structures of dominance. In his 1983 lectures at the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign, Hall argued for an understanding of culture as "experience lived, experience interpreted, experience defined" and engaged in, to borrow from Barbara Christian, the theorizing of *why* such living, such interpreting, and such defining mattered.[24] We at *Lateral* understand culture as material, and discourse as a point of production, and thus as a point of contention and movement and as pivotal for change. And yet, as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang remind us, decolonization must be more than a metaphor.[25]

As an academic journal working in and through a framework of cultural studies, we urge our readership and respective affiliated organizations to recognize the ongoing genocide of Palestinians and the ongoing theft of their land as the hallmarks of settler colonialism; to take action in support of a ceasefire and find ways to fight for the abolition of the military-industrial complex; and to heed the

calls of our Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim students in demanding more from administrations in the places where we teach. Our students are amongst the youth paving the way to abolition, and we might take our cues from them. For instance, where we work,[26] students are making a variety of demands: from boycotting, divesting from, and sanctioning Israel (BDS), to broader calls for university administrations to cut ties with settler colonialism and racial capitalism, to calls for quotidian interventions like hiring Imams, making more literal and figural space for Muslim and Arab Student Associations on campus, establishing institutionally supported departments and programs dedicated to Middle Eastern and North African Studies, and supporting Palestinian Solidarity Weeks and coalitional justice organizations (including anti-colonial Jewish groups) on our campuses. We know written work matters, but material intervention both encompasses and exceeds written work; fighting against genocide must also involve other forms of action.

Such work is under way by anti-imperial and anti-colonial Jewish organizers, including If Not Now[27] and Jewish Voice for Peace,[28] who refuse to allow "anti-Zionism" and "anti-semitism" to be irresponsibly conflated.[29] They reject the notion that calling for a ceasefire in Gaza is somehow too radical of a demand: "We need a ceasefire now, and we need Palestinian freedom from bombs, starvation, genocide, apartheid, occupation, and all forms of oppression; and we refuse to let Jewish pain be co-opted to support these horrors."[30] While we know only a few examples, we know there are decolonial and anti-colonial organizers on the ground in Palestine and the surrounding region, including the aforementioned Palestinian Feminist Collective, members of the Birzeit University Union of Professors and Employees in Ramallah,[31] and several MENA/SWANA-based feminist groups who signed a statement titled "Anti-Colonialism is a Feminist Issue" on October 14.[32] In the US, on university campuses and in surrounding communities, organizations are actively working and expanding such as Academics Against the Assault on Gaza,[33] Faculty for Justice in Palestine,[34] Students for Justice in Palestine,[35] and Within Our Lifetime,[36] among many more.

Just as there has been a sense of impossibility in writing at this time, ending this introduction similarly evokes a feeling of incompleteness, of the poverty of language against this moment. Still, within the context of editing, there is work to be done. Readers and contributors can find our commitments to editorial alternatives in our Publications Ethics Statement < https://csalateral.org/about/#ethics> : "recognizing that research and publication are as imbricated with issues of power, inequality, access, and justice as any other arena, we acknowledge that *Lateral* must take intentional actions to respond to its context." As such, *Lateral* follows COPE: Committee on Publications Ethics' "Code of Conduct for Journal Editors < https://publicationethics.org/files/Code_of_conduct_for_journal_editors_Mar11.pdf> " and has adopted "Anti-Racist Scholarly Reviewing Practices: A Heuristic for Editors, Reviewers, and Authors < https://docs.google.com/document/d/1lZmZqeNNnYfYgmTKSbL2ijYbR4OMovv6A-bDwJRnwx8/edit#heading=h.ymiupo69pn4r> " as part of a process of continued improvement. We do not offer this approach as the singular answer but as one of many necessary interventions.

As Sa'ed Atshan writes, "Absolving oneself from relations to imperial powers does not necessarily mean that one can be absolved from other relations of oppression."[37] Any critique of Israeli settler colonialism and agitating for Palestinian liberation must be intersectional[38] in nature: women of color feminisms, queer of color critique, disability/crip studies, Black Studies, and Marxist analysis, to name but a few, have also—although, not always—offered many of us sites in which to ground our critique and agitating in relation to anti-Blackness, xenophobia, Islamophobia, capitalism, cisheteropatiarchy, misogyny, misogynoir, and ableism. Such sites have historically functioned, and continued to function, as spaces for building and maintaining alternatives, too. We remain committed to building alternatives, including through the mechanisms we have at our disposal at *Lateral*, and we continue to welcome authors to join in this work of

pushing the field of cultural studies further, towards its promise of critical inquiry matched by political engagement.

In This Issue

Authors in the "Towards Third Worlding" < https://csalateral.org/archive/forum/towards-third-worlding/> forum take up Vijay Prashad's invocation that "the Third World was not a place. It was a project."[39] The serious excavation of the Third World as a kind of *doing* instructs us on two critical points: first, that the geopolitical machinations of empire created the designation "the third world" as a means of continuing empire's unchecked regimes of power, and second, that a deep and avowed resistance to such domination has always existed and must continue to exist. In their introduction < https://csalateral.org/forum/towards-third-worlding/introduction-el-zein-kanuga/> to the forum, Rayya El Zein and Malav Kanuga ask the central question: "What would a critical return to the internationalisms of the Third World project offer workers, community leaders, prisoners, climate activists in the current moment?" As "diasporic writer-organizers in the United States engaged in struggles around abolition, Palestinian liberation, migrant justice, climate justice, and political education," R. El Zein and Kanuga highlight the urgency in historicizing the myriad and ongoing struggles occurring in the United States and understanding their connections. They write: "Alongside those working to build community accountability in the aftermath of violence, our exploration of Third Worlding is a search for frameworks of interpellating comrades into struggle." Among the sites of struggle explored in the form are the history of the Third World movement < https://csalateral.org/forum/towards-third-worlding/decolonization-and-the-third-world-namakkal/> , the Republic of New Afrika < https://csalateral.org/forum/towards-third-worlding/captive-new-afrikan-nation-solidarity-liberation-onaci/> , Ali Sardar Jafri's epic poem *Asia Jaag Utha* < https://csalateral.org/forum/towards-third-worlding/reawakening-ali-sardar-jafri-

asia-jaag-utha-ramnath/> , and the 1967 Naksa and afterlives of Egypt's defeat in the Six Day War < https://csalateral.org/forum/towards-third-worlding/anti-colonial-defeat-1967-naksa-consequences-el-zein/> .

Also in this issue, Thokozani N Mhlambi's "Regional Mobilities, Technology and the Status of Myth in Africa: Retrieving Musical/Creative Codes in KwaZulu-Natal before Colonialism" < https://csalateral.org/issue/12-2/regional-mobilities-technology-myth-africa-musical-creative-codes-kwazulu-natal-colonialism-mhlambi/> analyzes craft specializations in KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa) in relation to cultural and ritual repertoires that predate European colonialism. In doing so, Mhlambi offers a wider regional and continental history with the potential to inform African identities today.

James N. Gilmore, Madeline Hamer, Valerie Erazo, and Patrick Hayes return to January 6, 2021 in "'Whose house? Our house!': Streaming Revolution during the US Capitol Riot." < https://csalateral.org/issue/12-2/whose-house-our-house-streaming-revolution-during-the-us-capitol-riot-gilmore-hamer-erazo-hayes/> This co-authored article examines the roles of affect and social media in the cultivation and dissemination of extremist political views. In addition to their insightful critiques, the authors model a novel methodology involving crowdsourced video and social media archives that are then scrutinized for their formal aspects and political content.

Renyi Hong and Zachary Mun Wei Chan's "Making Live through the Gig: The Case of Comfort Taxis in Singapore" < https://csalateral.org/issue/12-2/making-live-through-gig-comfort-taxis-singapore-hong-chan/> explores the gendered nature of gig culture and how the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) Workers' Co-operative Commonwealth for Transport created life possibilities and restraints for working-class Singaporeans in and beyond the 1970s. The authors compare internal documentation from the cooperative with news articles and government statements to explore how the "family man" emerged as a key figure through the

state's incorporation of unlicensed "pirate" taxi operators, and how this figure continues to inform contemporary changes in Singapore's gig economy.

Finally, "Let's Relax!," < https://csalateral.org/podcasts/positions/lets-relax/> the second episode of the Positions podcast produced by Mark Nunes and Elaine Venter, finds Andrew Culp and the Cultural Studies Association's Performance Working Group Co-Chair Hui Peng discussing "relaxed performance" with Leigh Jackson, Director of Accessibility & EDI Programming at People's Light outside of Philadelphia, and Dr. Hannah Simpson, Lecturer at the University of Edinburgh and author of *Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance* (Palgrave, 2022). The podcast is accompanied by a scholarly commentary by Patrick McKelvey.

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